

Regime-Change Threat On Horizon in Syria

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

It's official: A coup against the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad is in the works.

None other than would-be *golpista* (coup maker), former Syrian Vice President Abdel Halim Khaddam, made the announcement in an interview to the Saudi daily *al-Sharq al Awsat* on Jan. 6. Speaking from his residence in Paris, Khaddam said he was organizing the Syrian opposition to "create the right atmosphere for the Syrian people to topple the regime." He added: "This regime cannot be reformed, so there is nothing left but to oust it. The Syrian people will be the ones to oust it." Khaddam claimed that he had no contact with outside forces, and was merely acting in the interests of his beloved country.

A week earlier, Khaddam had made headlines when he told *al-Arabiyya* television, that al-Assad had threatened former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri during a Beirut meeting. "I will destroy anyone who tries to hinder our decisions," he quoted al-Assad as having said. Khaddam also implicated Rustom Ghazaleh, the chief of Syrian military intelligence and long-term official in Lebanon, saying that he too had threatened Hariri.

Khaddam claimed that he had urged al-Assad to discipline Ghazaleh, but that instead, the President promoted Ghazaleh. In effect, Khaddam was providing more "evidence" to fill out the UN-commissioned Mehlis Report on the assassination, which targetted the Syrian government.

This announcement is only the most recent in a series of dramatic events that have become almost commonplace in Syria, since the neo-con cabal, led by Vice President Dick Cheney, started its drive to destabilize the Damascus government, on the heels of the March 2005 assassination of Rafiq Hariri. Hariri's murder had been laid at the doorstep of Syria, and, in the course of a UN-commissioned probe led by Detlef Mehlis, one report after another came out, again insisting that Syria was to blame—all without any proof, as *EIR* reported on Dec. 9, 2005.

The fact that Khaddam has surfaced now as an accuser and *golpista* in this extraordinary fashion, should not be surprising: Cheney et al. have their backs against the wall in the United States, and are desperate to launch a foreign policy adventure as a way of regaining control—be it against Syria or Iran.

Khaddam's Trio

"Why?" is the question raised not only in Syria and Lebanon, but throughout the Arab world. Why would a man of Khaddam's experience and stature suddenly turn against al-Assad? Khaddam supported Hafez al-Assad's rise to power in 1970, became Deputy Prime Minister in 1974, and was put in charge of relations with Lebanon and Iran. Then, in 1984, he became Vice President, before taking over foreign affairs. In 2000, he assisted Bashar al-Assad in assuming the Presidency, after the death of al-Assad's father. Then, after having faded a bit into the background, Khaddam left the Ba'ath Party last June and went to France, allegedly because he lamented the lack of "reforms" in the party, a curious charge coming from someone who characterized reforms as "serving the plans of foreigners and Israel."

To gain insight into the Khaddam affair, one has to look at Khaddam's connections in Lebanon, and in France. According to reliable Lebanese sources, as well as area press reports, Khaddam was a member of the "trio" which de facto ran Lebanon over the past decades. Other members of the trio were Ghazi Kanaan and the Syrian Army Chief of Staff, Hekmat Shehabi. Kanaan was a former Syrian Interior Minister who was in charge of Syrian intelligence in Lebanon for decades. Kanaan had testified to the Mehlis commission about his close relations with Hariri, including his having received substantial funds from the Lebanese magnate. After this was reported on Lebanese television network, NTV, Kanaan committed suicide on Oct. 12, 2005.

The three men ran Lebanon, and all had close relationships with Hariri, who might be considered the fourth member of a quartet. Therefore, whatever Gazaleh or al-Assad may have been accused of doing in Lebanon, these figures were equally involved.

Khaddam's relations with Hariri and his three sons were close. As a business partner of Rafiq Hariri, he helped him rise to power. Khaddam's dealings with the sons involved the mobile telephone business, as well as airlines. Any business that went on in Lebanon, went through this trio, one source said.

According to Lebanese sources, the trio, with the financial backing of Hariri, was planning to overthrow the Assad regime. At the time of Kanaan's suicide, in fact, rumors of his involvement in coup plans had circulated. As for Chief of Staff Shehabi: He reportedly left Syria in August 2005, and now lives in Paris, also, according to one source, and regularly visits the United States.

The French Connection

Lyndon LaRouche pointed to the French connection as key, and linked it to the role of certain Saudi circles. Both French President Chirac and certain Saudi circles had been closely associated with Hariri. The television network and the daily newspaper which interviewed Khaddam, on his accusations against the Syrian government and his announced coup

ambitions, are both Saudi-controlled. Khaddam, according to Lebanese sources, has a strong French connection, and, as French intelligence has good relations with the Israeli Mossad, so does Khaddam. According to Israeli press reports, six months ago, Khaddam had several meetings with Israeli Mossad officials.

When Khaddam first surfaced with his accusations against al-Assad, the working hypothesis was that this nexus could be involved in plans for regime change in Damascus. Khaddam's turn against al-Assad was seen as the signal for other forces inside France or abroad, that such a move—long on the drawing boards of the neo-cons, in the infamous "Clean Break" doctrine of 1996 (which planned to do away with the Oslo peace accords)—was about to enter the operational stage.

There is also a sectarian aspect to the affair, which is foreboding: Khaddam, like Hariri, is a Sunni. It may be that the French (and the Saudis) are seeking to strengthen the hand of the Sunnis regionally, as a countermove to the emergence of a strong Shi'ite presence in Iraq, Lebanon, and, of course, Iran. This would cohere with U.S. neo-con operations in Iraq, mediated by U.S. Ambassador Khalilzad, to negotiate for a Sunni presence in the next Iraqi government.

Now Khaddam has openly admitted his coup ambitions. But this will not be a cakewalk. As Syrian ambassador to Germany, Dr. Hussein Omran told *EIR*, Khaddam is considered a traitor, not only by the Ba'ath Party and the parliament, which has accused him of high treason and has confiscated his assets; he also is hated by the population. Anyone who works with foreigners—especially the U.S. neo-cons—Omran explained, is clearly not working in Syria's interests. Omran expressed his view that Syria, like a well-built ship riding on tumultuous seas—the tumult having been created by external forces—would see many people jump ship, in hopes of saving their skins; however, they would end up either drowned or eaten by sharks, while the ship would return to harbor safely.

Other regional experts see the danger of a coup attempt as leading to catastrophic developments. In their view, if any violent operation were mounted, then instead of regime change, anarchy and chaos would ensue, with a bloody settling of accounts among rival ethnic and political groups. Ambassador Omran spoke of "programmed chaos," or what the other side calls "constructive chaos."

Can It Be Stopped?

After Khaddam's Dec. 30 interview, in which he first accused al-Assad of complicity in the Hariri murder, the UN investigating commission officially requested permission to question al-Assad, Khaddam, and Foreign Minister Farouk al-Shara'a. No response has been issued as of this writing. As for Ghazaleh, also implicated by Khaddam, he announced on Jan. 4 that, though he was innocent (and had already been questioned by the commission), he

would resign or "die as a martyr" if his leadership asked him to do so.

The pressure on the Syrian government is reaching intolerable heights. U.S. Ambassador to the UN John Bolton has added fuel to the fire, by charging Syria with "obstructing the investigation, of tampering with the evidence, and not making witnesses available in a timely fashion."

How, in this situation, can a tragedy be averted?

An important regional effort has been mounted by Egypt and Saudi Arabia at this juncture. An extraordinary meeting took place in Jeddah on Jan. 4, between President Hosni Mubarak and his Foreign Minister, and King Abdallah, accompanied by Crown Prince Sultan bin Abdel-Aziz, Interior Minister Prince Nayaf bin Abdel-Aziz, and Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal. No press conference was held, and no statements were made to the press, but a diplomat reported they had decided to send a high-level Saudi envoy to Damascus, to calm down relations between Damascus and the UN.

The presumed mission of the envoy would be to attempt to convince President al-Assad to meet the demands of the UN commission. The specter of a foreign-orchestrated coup on the horizon, would be used as an instrument of persuasion. According to the Saudi paper *al-Hayat* on Jan. 6, Mubarak and Abdalla want Assad to purge his government of all elements tainted by the Hariri murder.

The paradox raised at this point relates to the role of the Saudis: If Saudi circles have been supporting the Hariri faction in Lebanon, and the anti-Syrian opposition groups—including Khaddam—why should Riyadh try to negotiate a diplomatic solution to the crisis in Damascus? Regional experts explain that both Saudi Arabia and Egypt are under a Damocles sword, held by the U.S. neo-cons, who have targetted both nations in their crusade for "democratization" of the Arab world. Thus, both Cairo and Riyadh have an interest in preventing violent coups against Arab governments. Furthermore, although some Saudi circles may be involved in the *golpista* trio, King Abdallah is related by marriage to the al-Assad family, and, as a pan-Arabist, is opposed to such external interventions.

The Saudi-Egyptian initiative, flanked by talks between Mubarak and French President Chirac in Paris on Jan. 6, could ease the pressure. But the definite defeat of the coup plan will come only when the coup masters in Washington, Cheney and Company, are removed from the scene.

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